DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 824 JC 010 198

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TITLE WWW.2CHEAT.COM.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 7p.; Paper contributed to the Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference (3rd, Honolulu, HI, April 7-9, 1998).
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/org/tcon98/paper/rooks.html.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cheating; Community Colleges; Educational Strategies; *Internet; *Plagiarism; *Student Behavior; *Two Year College Students; Two Year Colleges; *World Wide Web

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the subject of cheating and plagiarism via the World Wide Web. After spending just a few hours browsing on the Internet, the author found dozens of "cheat" sites that offered term papers of all kinds. Some sites charge a fee for papers, some sites only request that students join by sending in one of their papers to add to the list, and some sites offer what they have for free to anyone, including professors. Most offered papers with in-text citations or footnotes and bibliographies, at no extra charge. The Evil House of Cheat, for example, offers access to 9,500 essays covering over 40 categories for $9.95 a year. Some of the more disingenuous sites pretend to be research companies that send papers to students to use only as "reference" or as a "resource." Though it is difficult, if not impossible, to stop cheating and plagiarism completely, several successful strategies have been developed and tried over the years. A number of them are presented. One is to avoid giving open-ended or generic topic assignments. In addition, setting specific criteria and standards for the materials that must be in the paper might make plagiarism impractical if not nearly impossible. (JA)

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BROWSING THE PROBLEM

During a recent online faculty meeting, someone brought up the subject of cheating and plagiarism via the Web. This old problem has new life on the Internet. If you thought the discovery of these sites in the past few years had succeeded in getting them shutdown, it hasn't. They are spreading. After spending just a few hours browsing on the Internet, I easily found dozens of interesting and disturbing cheat sites offering term papers of all kinds. I counted 40 links at one site alone.

Some sites charge a fee for papers, some sites only request that students join by sending in one of their papers to add to the list, and some sites offer what they have for free--to anyone, including professors. Papers offered ranged from high school to college to graduate school level. I was disappointed to see that some sites carried Web advertising from the likes of AT&T and Amazon.com. Some include links to pornography sites as well.

Most sites have a disclaimer. They vary from insincere to arrogant to in-your-face. Most assume or argue they are protected by the First Amendment. Some warn students not to turn in the papers from their sites. The School Sucks site warns students that plagiarizing the site's papers is foolish because they're so well known that teachers, professors, and the media visit the site regularly. It also quotes and acknowledges the plagiarism section in Diana Hacker's **A Writer's Reference** .

Sites vary greatly offering from a handful of papers to thousands. All subject areas are available. However, the quality varies greatly from atrocious to excellent. Very few are excellent. Many brag about how recent their papers are--none older than 1995, for example. Most offered some papers with in-text citations or footnotes and bibliographies, no extra charge. The Evil House of Cheat, for example, offers access to 9500 essays covering over 40 categories for $9.95 a year. As a bonus, the site has a link that describes different ways to cheat at school on exams.

Some of the more disingenuous sites pretend to be research outfits that send papers to students to use only as "reference" or as a "resource." Research Papers Online's information page reads, in part: We...do custom research & writing for you, with our excellent staff of writers in all subjects.... Theses & Dissertations are our specialty.... These papers are intended for reference and research purposes. They are not intended to be turned in "as is" for academic credit. Research Papers Online is not responsible for any consequences arising from improper use of any research paper. All papers...are new and have not been previously circulated. [1]

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The real message being sent isn't even subtle. They might as well have written "wink, wink" between each line. Not all sites have information or disclaimers this obvious or bold, but the true intent of each site is

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not lost on even the most casual student.

Though most students I know don't admit to using or subscribing to the sites, many admit they have visited them. I spent some time checking out the following popular sites: www.cheathouse.com www.ezwrite.com/ www.geniuspapers.com www.schoolpapers.com www.schoolsucks.com www.termpapers-on-file.com

A surprising number of students have created their own cheat sites usually containing their papers and often other student papers. One of the most amazing to me was one called Absolutely Free Online Essays run by a computer engineering student out of Cal Poly SLO. She has the gall to have her cheat site linked to her homepage and her resume! www.csc.calpoly.edu/~ercarlso/essays

I admit I had trouble figuring out if these students simply have no fear, no scruples, no sense, or no clue. Another student who runs his own site complained self-righteously that he had received a formal warning on his site from a "Net Nazi" informing him that to traffic in term papers in Texas is now illegal and subject to a fine of $500 per violation. The student's printed response was one of outrage, cursing, and an in-your-face attitude of "how dare you." The "Net Nazi" was a university dean of student affairs.

Like other instructors, I used to have some luck catching plagiarizers by checking writing styles against other work and noticing if the level of writing didn't match; for example, a C student turning in an A research paper (can be legitimate, but is usually suspicious). Plagiarizers used to always go for only A papers, or so it seemed. But several cheat sites offer papers that originally received only a passing grade. Some report the actual grade or percentage score the paper previously received. For many students (customers), it seems that avoiding the work of research and writing is the most important consideration, not the grade. The "B" range actually seems to be the most common and popular.

Ironically, for assigned topics beyond the generic or mundane--in most of the categories I checked--students would probably spend more time checking out sites to find a paper than they would just doing the paper themselves. But the custom places will provide just about any paper on any topic if the price is right--for about $9 to $15 per page. Credit cards are accepted by several sites. The Evil House of Cheat accepts VISA, MasterCard, American Express, and Japanese JCB. [2]

Still, I thought perhaps the problem was overblown. How many students can know about this? Then I found out the School Sucks site reports receiving about 40,000 hits per day. Since June of 1996, the site has received over 1.3 million hits. Its 2,500-plus papers are free. This year its founder, Ken Sahr, plans to go international, in 15 languages. So far he has expanded to and made links for School Sucks--Russia, School Sucks--Francais, and School Sucks--Israel.[3]

COUNTERMEASURES

Though it is difficult, if not impossible, to stop cheating and plagiarism completely, several successful strategies have been developed and tried over the years. Some are updates of older methods and others are as new as using the Internet. However, the consensus of opinion seems tobe that the key to combating plagiarism is in the requirements instructors give for creating the paper. Though the strategies outlined below do not appear to be unique to any particular individual, I've cited texts where I found them mentioned, for reference purposes.

To begin with, one strategy is to avoid giving open-ended or generic topic assignments. Allowing students to write about any topic of their choosing ("pick some topic related to this course") or giving general topics ("write on a social concern") makes plagiarism appealing and easy. Literally hundreds of

papers are available at online cheat sites on such topics. [4] A good countermeasure is to require that paper topics and the information used be particular to the specific topics of the class and the class discussions or current events. [5]

Requirements for what must be in the paper can also be effective. Setting specific criteria and standards for the material that must be in the paper can make plagiarism impractical if not nearly impossible. For example, consider requiring that students include material from class lectures or discussion. [6] Have them use their own class notes as a resource for material for their paper. This will make it extremely unlikely that they can find anything on the Internet or elsewhere that can come close to matching your lecture material. Another, older strategy is also still very effective. Simply require that they conduct an interview or a survey that must be cited in the paper. [7] Further require that a transcript of the entire interview or copies of the individual surveys be included in an appendix. Depending on the assignment, it may be possible to require students to use personal experience in their papers. [8] This isn't appropriate for all types of papers, such as the classic research paper, but it can work well for some assignments that call for experiential information.

Other strategies that work well involve using "peripheral" requirements, those that enhance the paper scholastically, but are not actually necessary to the meaning or argument presented in the paper. An example would be requiring an annotated bibliography. [9] If every reference had to have a synopsis, it would create a significant burden for students trying to pass off a plagiarized paper (even with a bibliography) as their own. Though many papers available on the cheat sites brag of having bibliographies included (at no additional charge), few have annotated bibliographies.

A natural for papers with scientific, medical, or technology topics is to require that an abstract be included. [10] A clever student could take a paper off the Internet and adapt it and write an abstract, but since the material would be unfamiliar, it creates a situation where the effort and risk make plagiarism a less attractive option. Another strategy that has gained in popularity is to require that a description of the research process be included with the paper or as a supplemental document. [11] It would be very difficult to create a believable description of a research process that one did not do.

One of the easiest and most effective methods is to require that students hand in copies or print-outs of their research and highlight or in someway mark any sections used or cited in their paper. Collecting students' "raw materials" makes turning in a plagiarized paper virtually impossible. Make sure to check the print dates on the copies or print-outs. The access date and time usually appears on the bottom margin of material from online sources. All dates should fall between the time the assignment was given and the date it was turned in. This requirement for copies or print-outs can be strengthened by insisting all information used or quoted be current, within the last two or three years, for example.

Perhaps the best anti-plagiarism method is to prescribe and carefully monitor the paper writing process, including the research, if research is required. Typically, this would include taking students through a step by step process that requires them to turn in, on a schedule covering a certain number of weeks, first, a topic statement, followed by a preliminary bibliography, copies of research notes, an outline, a rough draft(s), and a final draft. [12]

This process method is nearly fool-proof, though I know of an instance where a student tried recycling a friend's paper because the friend's instructor the previous semester had used the same requirements for completing and submitting research papers. The student was only found out because she bragged openly and was turned in by an honest student. So if several of your colleagues use this method, beware. Some combat the situation by keeping file copies of papers and then rely on memory to spot the recycled ones.

The only major drawback to using the process method is that it is incredibly time-consuming. If you are teaching three sections of 30 students each, it's a scramble to keep up with the process. Other than that, it works very well.

PLAGIARISM OR NOT?

No matter what you do or how hard you try to help your students, sooner or later that suspicious paper is going to land on your desk. How can you tell if it is really a plagiarized paper or not? First look for obvious things, like the sophistication and style of the writing. Has the student shown in previous work that he or she is capable of that level of writing and scholarship? If you are suspicious, talk to the student privately about the paper and ask questions about the material and the writing. It is surprising how many students will figure they are caught and simply confess they lifted the material.

Also look at the bibliography closely and at the dates of the material. I caught a student once because a personal interview the student supposedly conducted, and listed in the bibliography, was dated the previous semester. When I pointed this out, the student confessed the paper was her roommate's. If some of the sources seem unusual or esoteric, ask the student where he/she found them and then probe for some details on the source material. If they can't explain where the material came from or give specific information on the source, their veracity is in question.

A somewhat more extreme, but I'm told very effective method is the Glatt plagiarism program. This method can be used without actually having to find the source of the plagiarism. Glatt used a simple "cloze" test in which 300--400 words of the paper are retyped or copied leaving out every fifth word. The student is then requested to fill in the missing words. If the student cannot supply over 80% of the omitted words in the excerpt from the paper he/she supposedly wrote, then chances are the paper is above his/her reading and writing level and is plagiarized. [13]

A method that has been pioneered on the Internet is to use search engines to find the sources of plagiarized work. By entering an unusual phrase, a suspicious paragraph, or a direct quote into a search engine, the engine will find the source for you. This includes everything, everywhere, especially papers on the cheat sites. If the phrase or quote is found, it will bring up the entire text. [14] If this happens, you can print out or save the document and confront the student with the evidence.

Plagiarism is not a new problem, but with the Internet, it may be more challenging than it has ever been. The sheer volume of cheat material available is staggering. Though it can appear to be an overwhelming problem, several strategies, old and new, can be used to encourage students to use the Internet as the resource it is meant to be. Perhaps the best strategy is not to try to shutdown Internet cheat sites, which is probably illegal and impractical, but to render them useless or too risky to use. The best strategy is to make assignments that will engage students in the process of research, discovery, and writing in order to enhance their learning. Let part of that learning be the realization that plagiarism is not a viable option.

ENDNOTES

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